

Vietnamese Teaching Experience

Try to See Things My Way
By Lynn Guinn

Not long after the fall of Saigon I started my teaching career. I had my credential and planned to substitute for a few years until I got my two children through junior high. Like most plans go, mine changed sort of on their own.

It wasn't long before I was drawn into a classroom full of sixth graders to go along with my sixth grade and eighth grade children at home.

Within two years I was shuttled over to a school smack in the middle of a settlement of newly relocated Vietnamese families. That's what happens to new teachers. They get shuttled. I started that new year with trepidation.

I knew nothing about these people and was given a crash course about their customs and their language, and tossed into the classroom.

Go Fly a Kite!

Words from the Heart
By Bonnie Mark

Ah, vacation! There's nothing like it. My family and I just returned from a reunion on the Oregon coast. Of course it was fabulous. Sometimes reunions can be a bit stressful, but this one was pretty darn relaxing. We were all free to shop, walk the beach, eat out or just sit and look out the window at the roaring waves, which I found myself doing quite often.

My brother and sister, their spouses, along with my husband and I, rented a house right on the beach—a prerequisite for my sister-in-law. She wanted to be able to just step out the back door and be on the beach. Frankly, I thought of the practicality of it all; the extra expense would have scared *me* off. But now, all I can say is, it was worth every penny. If being at the ocean pours "life" back into you, for heaven's sake, go! And don't fool around being practical; let yourself experience the sand, the waves, the sights and sounds to the fullest.

Every night my husband and I slept with our bedroom window wide open, the waves crashing on the beach like a volcanic eruption—it was *really* loud. We slept like babies. That in itself would probably work better than a year of counseling to de-stress, and in the long run, be a lot cheaper too.

There were only a few flies in the ointment on this grand adventure. I realized there's a reason siblings leave home and don't live together any more—we *all* have our own ways of doing things. But after the first day or so, we quit stepping on each other's toes, and actually started working as a team. We really had fun (of all things)!

Like, when was the last time you played Yahtzee? Those were the "good old days" when board games actually brought families together. I get quite nostalgic when I remember the fun we had growing up on Scrabble and Monopoly. I found out on this trip that my sister, bless her heart, still cheats—and gets away with it. We let her win this time though; we hear she's scheduled for a heart procedure in the near future. I guess we'll let her do most anything now just as long as she gets well.

And, when was the last time you flew a genuine kite? Well, the last time I did I was about eight, and the dang thing couldn't even get off the ground. Couldn't have been the ten foot tail made of old bed sheets that slowed it down, could it? Or the flimsy paper material with skinny wooden sticks for bracing? I can't believe anyone ever launched one of those things. These days, in case you haven't noticed, kites have gone to a whole new level. They're amazingly aerodynamically designed to fly like the wind itself. I guess regular beach goers would know this, but I was amazed at all the beautiful kites you find at the beach. I spent hours just gazing into the sky. So did my dear brother-in-law, Gary.

Gary has reached an age where a few body parts are starting to show signs of wear. Lined up for two hip replacements and a shoulder surgery, he spent a good deal of *his* vacation just gazing out the window at those kites. Every now and then, he'd say, "Hmm, sure looks like fun, doesn't it?" We'd say, "Yup, sure does, Gary; you need a kite!" Of course, for four days he just shook his head and said, "Oh, nah, I just couldn't." Well, finally he could stand it no longer and by the last day of the trip, he was ready to purchase his very own kite. The one he chose looked a bit like a giant bumble bee, with yellow and black wings, but no doubt it was guaranteed to fly.

Grinning ecstatically, Gary's face said it all as he hobbled down to the beach to launch his kite. Well, that was about the last we saw of him. Four hours later, a few of us were beginning to worry and started to scan up and down the beach. I mean, how far could a guy go who needs two new hips and a shoulder? Finally, we got out the binoculars and someone said, "I think I see him—way down the beach!" The sixty-six year old man attached to the giant yellow and black bumblebee kite was now just a tiny speck about a mile down the beach. Go figure.

I was reminded of a saying I've seen on a poster: "We don't quit playing because we grow old; we grow old because we quit playing." Makes sense to me. Anyone for Scrabble?

Those. Children. Were. Brilliant. They spoke haltingly, but they spoke English. They had the most beautiful cursive handwriting. They had stories.

Remember that iconic scene where people were being taken from a Vietnamese rooftop, into a helicopter? Judging from one little guy's story, he was one of those people. Let me tell you, I had trouble keeping up with those delightful little "Einsteins," that year!

They were constantly teaching me about their country and how to say things in that impossible tonal language. They would giggle at my every attempt.

They brought photographs to show me. I stared at every detail in them. Once I asked, "Who is this?" and pointed to a man in a picture.

"Oh, that just a man my daddy work with."

It was General Westmoreland.

I had to learn algebra all over again that year. And Geometry! How did I manage to get all the way through college without taking geometry? I was one page ahead of them the whole year.

One fateful day a student wrote a spelling sentence about a right whale. The spelling word was "right" and I was completely ignorant in whale-ology.

"What do you mean right whale?" I said, thinking this was a language thing.

When he insisted that there was a right whale, I asked, stupidly digging myself further into my self made trap of ignorance,

"Oh, and is there a Left Whale, too?" Then not appearing stupid enough, I vowed that I'd eat my hat if there were actually a Right Whale.

The next day I brought in a cake made in the shape of a straw hat with a sassy plaid band around the brim. We all ate my hat. Mine tasted like crow.

There is one more thing I learned during the years I spent teaching in this community. English is a helter-skelter, carelessly thrown-together language.

Oh, it is colorful, and there are a plethora of words that mean almost the same thing, for one to choose from in order to precisely convey the feeling you are attempting to portray, but seriously, People, someone needs to clean it up a bit.

Vietnamese has no tenses. It has no plurals. They simply say, "Yesterday we go... or tomorrow we go..."

They say, "One tree, Two tree, or Three tree." Simple. Concise. Efficient.

Imagine how many conversations (arguments) I had to have concerning each of these subjects. "Well yes, you do add 'ed' to make it past tense, but not 'Putted.' You just say, 'I put it there before recess,' not 'I putted it there before recess.' These are called irregular verbs because they are, well..., not regular."

Each of these aberrations had to be thoroughly debated, probably due to the trust level over the Right Whale Debacle.

Then there was the "add 's' to make it plural." Except for a whole bunch of other times when you don't! You'll need to add "es" or "ies," to some words. And then there are deer and fish to deal with. I was afraid to bring up, "feet and teeth!"

They also wanted precise spelling rules. Well, in a lan-
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The Poet's Eye
By Patricia Wellingham-Jones

Dendrites on the Creek

They look like dendrites
waving on the creek's
slow-moving surface,
nerve system shadows
of reeds on the bank,
reacting to every slight change
in their world.

The Price of Home

Every time this old house dings me
with another bill, a new repair,
I remind myself it's home
and worth more than dollars.

The roof was our trip to Russia
(and sprang a leak in this winter's rain),
The Great Wall of Los Molinos
came after the '97 New Year's Day flood,
the plumbing was completely replaced
(one crisis after another until done),
the eternal, infernal, ongoing small fixes
make a rental with landlord look good

until I curl up in a knotty pine corner,
look across five ceiling levels
from entry to pantry,
lie in bed with the sound
of creek music lulling my dreams
or sit under the sycamore
and look over water.

Patricia Wellingham-Jones has a longtime interest in 'healing writing' and the benefits people gain from writing and reading their work together. Widely published, her chapbooks include *Don't Turn Away: Poems About Breast Cancer*, *Voices on the Land*, and *End-Cycle*, poems about caregiving.

Just Another Day at the Bank

Country Sunshine
By Jeri Johnson

Seattle is a big, beautiful city, but when you're 19 years old and your boyfriend is 50 miles to the south, the Greyhound Bus Station becomes your most desired Seattle destination.

I was in my first year of college and all I wanted was to go home, via the small town where Terry lived. Money was an object in getting there. A long weekend was coming up, and I was five dollars short on the price of a bus ticket.

I did actually have the necessary five dollars, but it was in small pieces. The previous summer I had been helping Grampa cut his lawn when the lawnmower rolled over a five-dollar bill.

Grampa had picked up all the pieces he could find and told me that perhaps the bank would make good on it. I went to the small local bank and they politely turned down my request. I'd stuck it back in my purse and forgot about it until desperation goaded me to try again at a larger bank in Seattle.

That afternoon I waited in a long line at the bank with my shredded money only to have the clerk shake his head no. I must have looked hungry or otherwise destitute. He directed me to a bank officer. The bank officer put the puzzle together and took out a big magnifying glass to study it. He indicated the problem was that each bill has two serial numbers printed on the face and that both numbers must be intact in order to replace the bill. Unfortunately, my bill was lacking a few numbers. I sat quietly contemplating a lonely weekend, waiting for him to gather up the pieces of my souvenir and return them. He studied the remnants for a while longer and finally put them in an envelope. Then he wrote an address on the outside of the envelope and gave me his business card.

"Take it to the bank at this address. Maybe they can help you. Show them my card and tell them I sent you."

Great. Another long walk without very much hope. I'd already been turned down by two banks, and I had the feeling I was about ready to strike out. The bill was obviously lacking its full worth. I had only about two-thirds of it left and several of the important numbers were mulch in my Grampa's lawn. But, hope springs eternal. I made the trek.

I didn't have the name of the bank, but the address was plain, and I had no trouble finding it. I walked through the front door and stopped dead still. There was a huge room which was completely empty, except for a door at the far side with a policeman with a big gun strapped on his hip. There was only one floor - no second or third floor that could house a normal bank. I turned to go. *Strike three. You're out!*

"Miss, may I help you?" The officer asked from across the room.

"I thought this was a bank," came my discouraged reply. "I was sent here by someone at First National."

He smiled. "This is a bank. It's a Federal Reserve Bank." He walked toward me, and I held out the business card and told him I had a five-dollar bill that needed replacing.

"I see," he said as he took the business card. He looked in the envelope, and then at me. "Well, follow me and we'll see if we can get this exchanged."

He led me to the doors he had been guarding and spoke into a wall phone. Shortly another uniformed man with a gun strapped on his hip walked out of the elevator doors. He introduced himself as a federal marshal and asked me to follow him. We went down two floors and walked out of the elevator. I thought I was having a dream. The whole floor was partitioned off in large wire cages where people were working with STACKS and STACKS of money.

At that point in my life, the most money I'd seen at one time was less than \$200. There had to be billions in this room. I was taken to one of the cages and "buzzed" through two locked doors. The money man inside the cubicle put the five-dollar bill together and brought out a big magnifying glass. (Who knew those things were standard at banks?) He studied it for a couple of minutes.

"Well, the numbers aren't complete, but I think I can replace it for you."

Yes, yes, yes!!! He had me sign a paper and handed me a crisp new five-dollar bill. I was "buzzed" out of the two locked doors where Mr. Federal Marshal waited for me. In the elevator up he asked if I'd ever been in a Federal Reserve Bank before. I answered no, that the bank where my parents went only had two clerks, and one of them was usually out to lunch or on a break. Then, to show myself the complete idiot that I was, I asked, "Has anyone ever tried to rob this bank?"

"Oh," he replied, "it wouldn't pay."

Well, it didn't look exactly easy, but it sure looked to me like it would pay.

Now just who would ask a question like that in a Federal Reserve Bank, in an elevator with an armed federal officer?? Just some dummy, greener than a new five-dollar bill, on her way out of town via the Greyhound Bus, with no clue that she had just seen a sight most people will never see.

Jeri Johnson resides in Whitmore with her husband and a wide assortment of animals. After retiring from a community college in Oakland, she is fulfilling her life long dream of writing. She is currently working on a novel and a book of poetry.

Bonnie Mark writes from Whitmore. She has published articles in "The Christian Quarterly" and written grants for the non-profit Whitmore Community Center. She also writes free, downloadable material for www.youlousedusfirst.com, a web site designed to help people find their way back to God.